

CONFIDENTIAL ATHENS 001643

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SUBJECT: GREECE: UNPRECEDENTED ANARCHIST VIOLENCE FOLLOWING
POLICE SHOOTING OF YOUTH

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DANIEL SPECKHARD. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On December 6-7, anarchist rioters caused extensive damage in downtown Athens and other Greek cities following the shooting by police of a 15-year-old protester Saturday evening. Lower key protests continued on Monday, but the situation remained volatile. The Education Minister has announced the closing of all schools for a Day of Mourning on Tuesday, which will put more students on the streets. The circumstances of the shooting remain under investigation, but statements by PM Karamanlis and other GOG leaders have tried to calm the violence with promises of severe punishment for the officers responsible. Some opposition statements have made no pretense of assuming innocence, severely condemning the policemen as "murders" and scheduling more protest allies. No U.S. facilities have been affected, and we are aware of no injuries to Americans. The RSO remains in close contact with the Police. END SUMMARY.

THE INITIAL INCIDENT

12. (SBU) On December 6, at approximately 21:00, two members of the Greek Police's Special Guard unit, Epaninondas Korkoneas and Vassilis Saraliotis, were accosted by a group of about 30 anarchist youths near Exarchia square in downtown Athens. Police reports said the youths had earlier hurled stones at the patrol car of the two policemen, who retreated, parked the vehicle, and returned to investigate on foot. A confrontation ensued. Reports differ greatly on what happened next. According to the policemen, the anarchists were pelting them with rocks and bottles, and Korkoneas said he feared for his life. Allegedly following Police SOPs, the Police said Korkoneas fired warning shots, two in the air and one on the ground, the latter which presumably ricocheted into one of the youths, 15-year old high school student Alexis Grigoropoulos, who was rushed to a hospital and pronounced DOA. Some witnesses say, however, that Korkoneas stepped back, took aim, and fired at Grigoropoulos. A local CSI team has said so far they have been able to locate only two shell casings, and an autopsy of Grigoropoulos' body, which may reveal the nature of the shooting through the ankle of the bullet entry, has been delayed because the family is choosing its own forensic pathologist.

RIOTS ENSUE

13. (SBU) Within minutes of the incident, anarchist Web sites and SMS messages carried news of the shooting throughout the anarchist community. Bands of masked rioters quickly fanned out from Exarchia square to torch businesses and cars, seize university campus buildings in various parts of town, and confront police anti-riot forces. The riots quickly spread in other Greek cities. Police battled rioters throwing stones and petrol bombs in Thessaloniki, Patras, Ioannina, Heraklion and Chania on Crete, and other locations.

14. (SBU) On Sunday, December 7, riots continued in Athens and other cities. In Athens, an anti-police rally quickly deteriorated into a running battle with anti-riot squads. Businesses, banks, and even apartment buildings became targets of the rioters. Two supermarkets, two car dealerships, and many parked cars were set afire. Firefighters evacuated an apartment building when its ground floor was set on fire by petrol bombs. At the Athens Polytechnic campus, masked protesters were observed returning to the campus to replenish their ammunition of petrol bombs apparently being prepared inside campus buildings seized by anarchists and turned into ammo workshops. Police, prohibited by law from entering academic grounds, watched. At the Athens Economic University, anarchists, occupying the terrace of the building, pelted police with missiles and petrol bombs. On Monday, December 8, smaller groups of protesters continued to confront police and a crowd of about 300 hurled rocks at the Parliament. Larger protests have been called for Monday evening by the SYRIZA party and other leftist organizations. Scores of schools around the country are under the control of "student committees;" teachers' unions expressed sympathy for the student "justified mobilization" and appeared headed for strike action themselves.

15. (SBU) Although we have no official estimates yet, the economic damage after nearly 36 hours of rioting is considered by market watchers and merchant associations to be significant. In Athens, a sizable number of businesses suffered fire damage and looting of various degrees. The upscale shopping area around Ermou street near the Parliament building was the most severely affected. There is the

additional loss of shops closing early or consumers staying home during the pre-holiday season. There were reports of widespread damage and looting in other cities as well.

GOG RESPONSE

16. (C) Grigoropoulos' death and the intensity of the riots took both the Karanlis government and the police by surprise. Public statements by Greek officials appeared designed to try to calm the situation by promising swift and severe punishment of the two policemen. President Papoulias,

in his letter of condolences to Grigoropoulos's parents, said: "His death was a wound upon the function of the rule of law. I wish (this incident) to be the last (of its kind) and I am certain that those responsible will be treated accordingly." In his letter of sympathy, Karamanlis asked the family to "accept my condolences for the unfair loss of your son...Like all Greeks, I am deeply saddened; I know that nothing can relieve your pain." Karamanlis also said that those responsible would be brought to justice and that "the state will see to it that such a tragedy does not happen again." Interior Minister Pavlopoulos told a press conference that "those responsible for the killing" would be dealt "exemplary punishment." Pavlopoulos and his deputy, former CHOD Hinofotis, offered their resignations, which the PM declined to accept.

17. (SBU) The two police officers involved in the incident were arrested on orders from Chief of Police Tsiatouras and are being held on a variety of felony counts, including premeditated murder. They were given until December 10 to prepare their statements before appearing before prosecutors.

An internal investigation to ascertain the exact circumstances surrounding the two Special Guards' actions, as well as an urgent prosecutor's inquiry, were to begin "immediately."

18. (SBU) On December 8, Education Minister Stylianidis announced the closing of all schools on Tuesday, December 9, for a National Day of Mourning for Grigoropoulos. The Mayor of Athens announced the canceling of city Christmas celebrations, including the hanging of lights and decorations in squares and streets.

OPPOSITION FUELS ANGER

19. (C) Opposition statements have used heated language, making no pretense of assuming innocence until proven guilty for the policemen and focusing on the culpability of the government. A PASOK statement issued shortly after the initial incident stressed the grave responsibility of the police and their leadership for the incident. PASOK leader Papandreu spoke of the "arbitrary practices that increase barbarity" and stressed that Greece was living through "times of sorrow." A statement by leftist coalition SYRIZA said "a minor was murdered in the center of Athens by police forces. Without any reason, police shoot and kill young girls and boys as if the country were in a state of war. This murder is a brutal, unacceptable and inconceivable event." The Greek Communist Party (KKE), while condemning the murder of a 15-year-old boy by a police officer,⁸ also criticized the violence that had swept Greek cities.

EMBASSY RESPONSE

10. (SBU) U.S. facilities, thus far, have not been affected, and we are aware of no injuries to Amcits. The RSO is in close touch with the Police. On December 7, the Embassy issued an SMS message to its employees and a warden message to the American community to caution against traveling into the areas affected by the rioting. On December 8, the Embassy held an EAC meeting to discuss further actions in light of the student holiday on Tuesday and a general transportation strike that had been planned for Wednesday before the recent events (SEPTEL). The funeral for Grigoropoulos is planned for Tuesday in the neighborhood of Paleo Psychiko where many Embassy families reside. In Thessaloniki, rioters damaged the car of an FSN who had come to the Consulate to observe events.

COMMENT

11. (C) The events of the last few days come at what was already a difficult time for the Karamanlis government, faced with the ongoing Vatopaeidion scandal and the severe economic downturn. With polls showing main opposition PASOK already ahead of Karamanlis's New Democracy by as much as 5.5

percentage points, the riots could further fuel voter dissatisfaction. The Karamanlis government thus far has focused on placating the angry left by promising swift and severe punishment for the police officers involved in the incident. Such statements have done little to appease the anarchists, however, and run the risk of weakening the will of the police, who feel vulnerable in using any force in the face of the rioting without the support of the government.

12. (C) Greek observers see the current riots as an extreme expression of the "civil war" that has been waged over the last 30 years between the police and self-styled "anarchists." Against the legacy of the Junta and a post-war tradition of persecuting the Left, political parties have been ambivalent toward any enforcement proposal aimed to suppress Greece's anarchists, who tend to congregate in Exarchia. In circumstances similar to those surrounding the Grigoropoulos shooting, the 1985 death of another teenager, Michalis Kaltezas, who was shot and killed while torching a police bus with officers inside, resulted in months of street violence between police and anarchist rioters. But unlike 1985, the anarchists have expanded their circle of targets to include not only businesses, police, and government buildings but also residential locations. The anarchists are also exploiting new technology, such as SMS and Websites, to communicate and mobilize supporters, and thus far, the GOG has had only limited success meeting this new challenge with its more traditional approach. Two days after the shooting incident, the atmosphere in Athens remains tense with experienced observers uncertain when the pressure behind the on-going demonstrations and violence will abate.

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